

GOOD PRACTICES FOR IMPROVING PROMOTION AND SALES FOR ROMANIAN ECOLOGICAL AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS

Irina HANGANU¹ & Cristina FLEȘERIU²

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, life is an uninterrupted discovery. The consumers tend to have a healthier lifestyle, with a diet that has optimal nutritional values, to maintain their health, in harmony with the nature and the environment. Thus, marketing is selling dreams, impressions, perceptions, creating the opportunity to live through a unique experience, to help the customers write their own story, not just to satisfy them. The main objective of this research is to find ways to support promotion and sales of ecological producers in agriculture. Producers offer high quality products, with no artificial additives and contribute to the protection of the biodiversity and the environment, and implicitly of our health. The exploratory research represents the main purpose of this paper. Starting from the analysis of the literature review related with ecological agricultural market, the evolution of the customer's behavior and the identification of the components of the promotional mix, an overview is established. The in depth interviews and the analysis of international models show that informing the producers regarding the consumer's dynamic needs (product diversity and freshness, adaptability to the market demand, online orders, home delivery, the client feedback, the possibility to return goods, to process their own products etc.), openness to associations and collaborations on horizontal and vertical axes, communication and information campaigns, the multi-functionality of farms, proactive promoting, creating a cluster structure are among the key factors to improve sales and promotion.

Keywords: Ecological agriculture, Promotion mix, Sales, Promotion, Cluster.

JEL Classification: M31, Q13.

¹Bachelor Student, Faculty of Business, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

²Lecturer, PhD, Faculty of Business, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

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1. Introduction

The 21st century agriculture is reinventing itself as a new global business, based on globalization, standardization, productivity, a massive growth of demand, innovation in presentation and packaging, always counting on efficiency. The new agriculture needs new functional instruments to increase its capacity of innovation and competitiveness (Gálvez-Nogales, 2010).

Toncea et al. (2016) claim that people must eat to live, and food shall be a basic medicine to maintain and regain one's health. The main supplier of a "living food" is the ecological agriculture (Toncea et al., 2016).

Ecological, biological and organic are terms seen as synonyms, used interchangeably at European level (Toncea et al., 2016) and "ecological agriculture" is the phrase used in Romania because the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR) sees that "the system of ecological agriculture has the role of producing cleaner food, more suitable to the human metabolism, in a complete correlation with the environment's protection and development. One of the main objectives of the ecological agriculture is the production of fresh, authentic products, that respect the natural and environmental factors" (Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Romania, n.d.).

The Romanian ecological agriculture has a high potential for development, both for supply as well as for demand which, via efficient marketing, can improve everyone's wellbeing. Because nowadays marketing does not simply represent the selling of goods and services but rather dreams, sensations, impressions and perceptions, reality is reinterpreted through what the client feels when buying a product. The marketer must be ready to predict the problems of potential clients and identify the solutions in the form of goods and/ or services. Furthermore, one must craft the opportunity of living a unique experience which helps the customer not just to satisfy his/her need, but to live a story (Kotler and Armstrong, 2014).

Because of this, every well-informed supplier should pay attention to the way it is perceived in the consumer's mind. According to multiple specialists, the created image and the credibility represent the most important market capital. The consumers today appear in a perpetually dynamic way. They are increasingly more and more informed, expectant, more resistant to customer retention and expect more for what they have paid (Nedelea, 2011).

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The purpose of this study is to identify the actions and the communication tools used as well as to attract potential clients, monitoring both the satisfaction of their needs and wants regarding a healthy lifestyle for both people and environment, as well as raising the efficiency and the revenues of small farmers.

The paper presents information regarding the evolution of demand and supply in the ecological agricultural sector, as well as how the consumer behavior changed nowadays. By analyzing the data obtained throughout the in-depth interviews with producers and specialists in the field, we identified the problems and the opportunities for the national producers.

Furthermore, potential solutions are recommended, which will allow the improvement of the sales and promotion activities of ecological agricultural producers, lower the costs, raise the revenues, and encourage the consumption for having a healthier lifestyle.

2. Literature review

Beginning with the 1980's, the consumers' interest towards ecological agricultural products increased in the European countries as well as in India, Latin America, Australia and the USA. One must not forget the fact that a continuous awareness campaign encouraging the customer to have a healthy diet and to contribute to the environment had a significant impact in getting tangible results (Brumă, 2014).

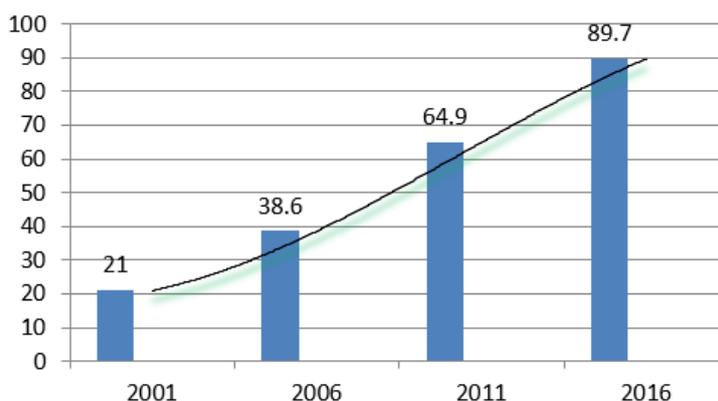
With the development of the market, the producer's behavior must be proactive, by always being informed, ready to learn, having a vigilant attitude but most importantly to anticipate the optimal plans to develop (Danciu, 2008). Depending on the vision and one's own means, any producer can choose their own approach of the market, adapted to the activity, but willing to satisfy the customers' needs and wants (Kotler, 2003).

Nedelea (2011) encourages the forming of tight relationships with the clients by using marketing instruments such as: offering financial advantages, including social and financial advantages, flexibility and adaptability to the economic, social, political and fiscal environment. Beyond that, the producers must be involved in the customer retention process by: building customer - producer relationships, encouraging customer feedback, regularly updating the information about the market dynamic, maintaining flexibility and speed when adapting to the market's trends and most importantly having quality as the utmost priority (Nedelea, 2011).

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Nowadays, we are experiencing a consumption that focuses more and more on products that offer a better life quality, for the people as well as for those that surround them and most importantly, for the environment (Fabris, 2009).

At a global level, the sales of organic foods and drinks have increased from 15 billion euros to almost 90 billion euros in the last two decades (Figure 1). The global market for organic products has increased in 2016 compared to 2015 by 10%, reaching almost 90 billion. North America and Europe generate 90% of sales from the international market (Willer, 2018).



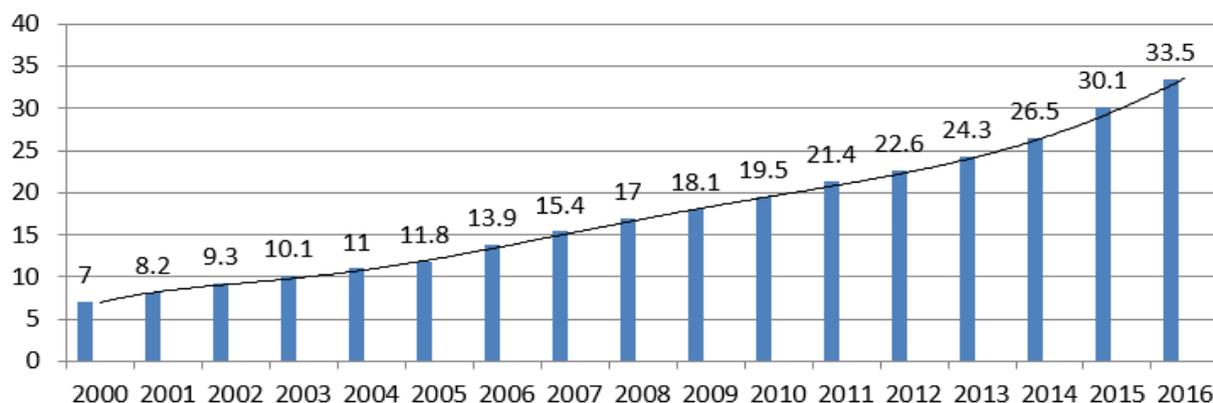
Source: FIBL-AMI, 2018

Figure 1. Sales trend for the organic products between 2001 and 2016

In 2016, the most developed countries in the ecological field were the US (38.9 billion euros), Germany (9.7 billion euros) and France (6.7 billion euros).

Between 2000 and 2016, the European market for organic products has increased from 7 billion to 33.5 billion euros. Between 2007 and 2016, despite the economic crisis, the market for organic products has doubled its value (Figure 2).

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Source: FIBL-AMI survey 2004-2018, Organic Data Network Survey 2013-2015

Figure 2. European market trend in 2000-2016

In 2016, the organic food market in Europe was estimated at 33.5 billion euros. The sales of organic food are concentrated in Western Europe. The German market was evaluated at 9.4 billion euros, followed by France with 7.8 billion euros (Table 1).

Table 1. Most important distribution channels at the European level in 2016 (millions of euros)

Country	Supermarket	Niche stores	Direct sales
Austria	1230	312	0
Denmark	1070	80	148
France	3024	2497	889
Germany	5455	2848	1175
Italy	1119	892	633
Netherlands	735	336	100
Sweden	1669	0	528
Switzerland	1859	249	12
UK	1743	400	50

Source: FIBL-AMI Survey 2018

The retail market generates the highest revenue in Europe. The most well-known supermarket chains offer organic products with their own label. In Germany, the organic niche stores have developed their offer using their own label (Dennree in Germany and Austria, Biocoop in France, Cuore Bio in Italy) (Willer, 2018).

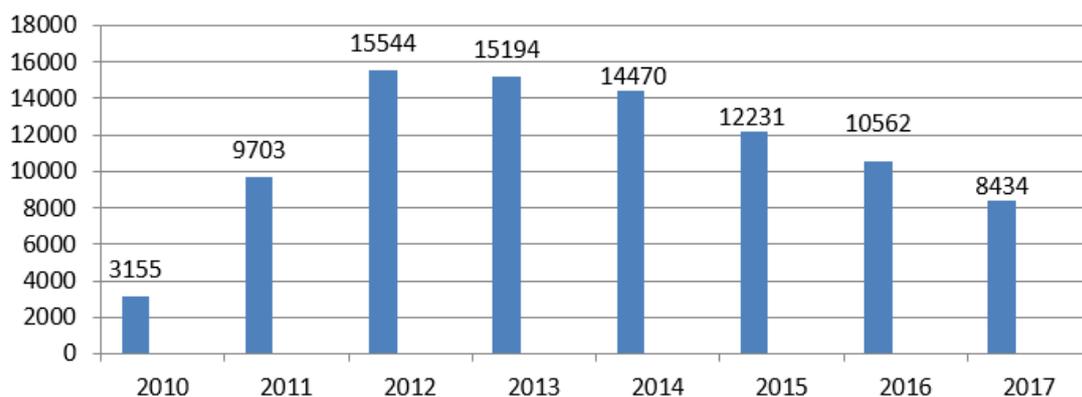
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The Romanian bio products' market is a very dynamic one. It is estimated that the market trend will be rising based on the growth from 2017 and 2018 (30%), and that it will continue to grow having a similar trend until 2020. In comparison to other European markets, the Romanian ecological products' market is still in its early stages (Cioba, 2018).

The ecological products represent a small percentage of the market (under 1%) but after the registered growth in the last few years, the value of the market is at around 80 million euros (Willer, 2018).

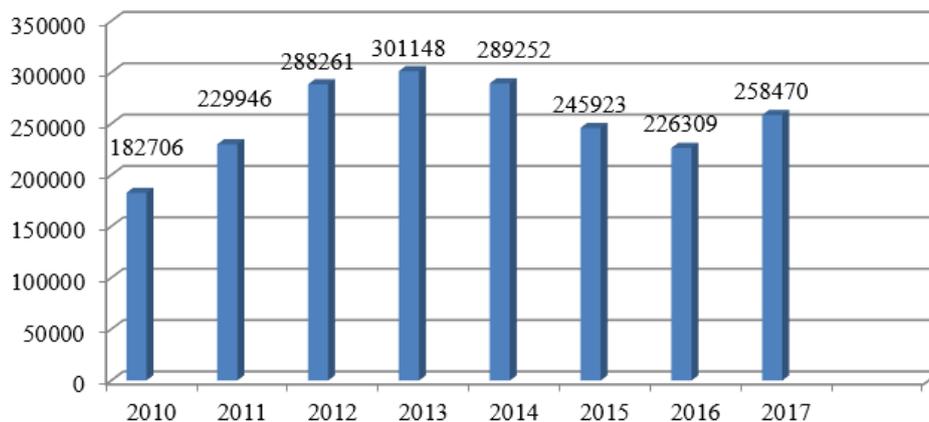
Although the consumption is rising, according to MADR, in Romania, the number of ecologically certified operators has had a fluctuating evolution, growing from 2010 to 2017 (from 3155 to 15544 operators), after this following a descending curve, registering 8434 operators at present (Figure 3).



Source: Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Romania, 2019

Figure 3. The evolution of the certified operators between 2010 and 2017

Regarding the cultivated surfaces, in 2010 there were 182706 ha, achieving a maximum of 301148 ha in 2013 after which the surface decreased to 258470 ha in 2017 (Figure 4) (Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Romania, 2019).

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Source: Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Romania, 2019

Figure 4. Evolution of ecological agriculture surfaces in 2010 – 2017 (ha)

The lack of transparency and promotion, the small range of Romanian products found in bigger stores could be the reason why most of the ecological products are exported, or that a lot of operators eventually stop producing in an ecological manner. In order to improve the consumption rate of ecological products one can use specific marketing instruments, such as: influencing and convincing customers, quality being the main element of success. Furthermore, diversity is a key element that can be achieved through products, quantity, packaging and labeling (Danciu, 2008). Thanks to labeling and products' certification, processing, handling and commercializing, the consumer is informed and can make a conscious decision (The State of Food and Agriculture, 2014:1).

The secondary data have created the premise for analyzing the promotion and sales methods that determine the success in this field.

In Switzerland, the development of the agriculture sector was strongly supported even by the federal Constitution, since agriculture can secure the way of producing food as well as maintaining the population in mountain areas. Technology, subsidies and excessive protection were the basic approaches for generating the products' success. If one were to follow the evolution of ecological agriculture in time, a rising trend emerges, for the cultivated surfaces as well as for the development. If between 1960 and 1970 the number of farms was between 500-1000, in 2016 it was over 6300 and almost 141000 ha, which means that almost 14% of the agriculture surface in Switzerland is dedicated to ecological agriculture (Willer, 2018). This growth was based on: the consumers' attention toward a

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healthy diet, the agricultural and environment policies that support organic farms with annual subsidies, internal commercialization at the supermarket level (like Coop and Migros), the permanent collaboration between the Bio Suisse society (which includes 90-95% of the organic Swiss farmers) and the FIBL institution which supplies data and practical advice for farmers (all regions offer courses to ecological agriculture, including technical support via consulting services) (Agriculturae, n.d.).

All these initiatives to support the rural environment contribute to opportunities for the entrepreneurs in the ecological agriculture sector to work in better conditions, having the possibility to optimize the costs with logistics, ensuring the proper environment to promote and sell ecological products.

In Italy, in the ecological food market the supermarkets manage to sell 41.6% of their biological products, the niche stores 32.6% and direct sales in markets, farms' gates and traditional stores adds up to 25.8% (Willer and Lernoud, 2018).

As seen in the Bioreport 2017-2018, in Italy, the market for ecological products in the supermarket chains has grown significantly, mostly because they commercialize products under their private label having optimal quality and promotional prices. Until now, the limiting factor for the consumption of bio products was the price. By distributing locally, one can eliminate or decrease distribution costs which will ultimately lead to a smaller final price and a higher profit for the producers.

A growth can be noticed in the number of vegetarian and vegan restaurants and an increase for ecological products in the school and hospital cafeterias. In 2014, in Italy there were 1.23 million portions eaten daily (Bioreport, 2017-2018).

According to the studies made by ISMEA in 2014, 51.8% of farms have a direct sales point on the farm's property and they rely on multifunctionality: agro-tourism, farms with a didactic purpose, etc.

The European Commission considers that through the agriculture multifunctionality and through differentiation, farms develop sustainability and competitiveness and create a key factor for the development of rural areas (Casini, 2009).

Ecological agriculture, in order to become multifunctional, needs to be able to also have related activities such as: to transform basic products for their direct sales as well as to introduce them in the specialized commercial circuits, to produce renewable electric energy,

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to own restaurants with or without accommodation, to do education in schools, organize events, practice alternative therapies etc. (Mangialardi, 2011).

In the Netherlands, the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture has founded an operative group which focuses on multiple sectors such as agriculture, children caretaking, wellness, tourism and education with the purpose of stimulating multifunctional agriculture. It promotes the digital transformation of rural areas and supports the learning networks and initiatives lead by the community. The Dutch entrepreneurial culture bets on the success of clusters in the agrarian sector and especially on the wellbeing of the people and implicitly of the society. Through their creation, clusters promote and develop innovation and technological progress with efficiency at its base, obtaining high quality products and services at minimal costs, becoming able to compete with foreign markets, taking into consideration that the vast majority of ecological products goes to export (Schouten, 2011).

The landscape is an important and very helpful resource for the multifunctional farmer. Moreover, the farms often use the existing buildings that are adapted to a multifunctional purpose. Multifunctional agriculture offers chances to women, especially since they are much more responsible than men. In multifunctional farms the variety of products offered has increased, and the number of complaints has decreased significantly. Many farmers state that they offer unique goods and services in the region (ISPRA, 2010).

3. Methodology

In Romania, the sector for ecologic products has difficulties regarding promotion and sales activities. This paper focuses on the exploratory research, whose final goal is to elaborate a guide of good practices for the promotion and the sales of ecological products. Analyzing the literature has led to identifying the factors that determine the success in the sphere of promotion and sales of ecological products. These factors are: informing the producers regarding the dynamic needs of consumers (products diversity and freshness as well as the ecological processing, online orders, delivery to the customer's homes, feedback, possibility to return the products), opening them towards associations and collaborations, communication campaigns, farms' multifunctionality, proactive promotion and creating cluster structures.

Taking as reference points the components of the promotional mix (advertisement, promotional sales, public relations, personal sales, direct marketing), we conducted structured interviews, having 15-20 in-depth questions, addressed to 36 producers and 4

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stakeholders' representatives (within the Institutions of Research and Development, universities specialized in agriculture, associations for ecological producers).

We have developed a comparative analysis between farmers, to observe the implication of these factors in their activities. Thus, after the qualitative research of primary data from interviews and secondary data we have identified the success determinants. These constitute the material to establish how the marketing strategies are applied, especially in the sphere of sales and promotion that lead to creating a potential solution to support the ecological agriculture and the rural development in Romania.

4. Results

After analyzing the literature, we have identified the factors that can influence the promotion and sales for ecological products, such as: the farmers' experience and level of information, the low degree of association and collaboration, the differences between the ecological producers and the State Institutions, the lack of use of the multifunctionality concept at the farm's level, the lack of horizontal association and vertical integration in promoting and selling, the lack of collaboration networks between the sectors that interact with the durable agriculture field, the lack of flexibility in satisfying the consumers' needs, in participating in venues and fairs in order to communicate and to present the products, the lack of proactive promoting aiming towards educating consumers and raising the farmers' revenues.

We have considered Europe as an example, where the continuous growth registered in the past years is mainly attributed to the proactive promotion through educating consumers to engage in having a healthier lifestyle and environment as well as being society-conscious. Because of this, in France, the sales for ecological products in mid-2017 have surpassed 7 billion euros (including restaurant sales), which means an increase of 500 million euros compared to the same period of time in 2016. The main requested products have been organic fruits and vegetables (Agence Bio, n.d.).

In Denmark, the country with the highest sales growth in the field, ecological products are increasingly important, even in cafeterias and hospitals. Furthermore, the imports have increased as well (Kaad-Hansen, 2019).

Sweden has the most dynamic ecological market in Europe, where this segment has increased by 38% in 2014 and 39% in 2015, up to 2.3 billion euros. Studies made by the

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Swedish Institute of Environmental Studies have contributed to increase the appetite for ecological products in everyone's diet (Agricultura bio crește în ritm susținut în Europa, 2017). The expanding process and the development in the Dutch food and beverage industry is based on many associations between the suppliers and the processors (Schouten, 2011). These associations have stimulated the market's growth and as a result, they contributed to the economic evolution through innovations and investments. Because the Dutch market is small, they have focused on the external market, even though, exporting means high costs, transport difficulties, cultural differences, lack of knowledge about the external markets that forces the products to be unique and innovative (Silvis et al., 2002). Association between companies become the optimal solutions to share knowledge and expertise, reduce costs and transport goods in more efficient conditions. These three effects of clusters increase the competitiveness on the international level for the Dutch agricultural businesses (Schouten, 2011).

Considering these key elements that contribute to developing the promotion and sales, we have created the interview questions. Thirty-six farmers that have cultivated or are currently cultivating ecologically were interviewed. The results are shown in the table below (Table 2).

Table 2. Farmers' responses related to the influence factors

Influence factors	YES	NO
Studies / experience in the ecological or commercial field	10	26
Information regarding the dynamic nature of the market and the consumers' needs	12	24
Production based on the diversity principle	9	27
Online or phone orders	7	29
Product delivery at customers' homes	6	30
Availability for association and collaboration on promotion and sales activities	9	27
Attendance to fairs and venues with products	6	30
Online promotion	7	29
Free products or price reductions	30	6
Memberships or contracts	9	27
Proactive promotion	6	30
Allowing on-farm visits	9	27
Multi-functionality	7	29
Interest in processing ecological products	6	30
Problems with stuffy bureaucracy	36	0
Collaboration with the City Hall or with the County Council	36	0

Source: made by the authors

Only 27.7% of respondents have studies or experience in the commercial or ecological agriculture field and 33.33% follow the market trends, especially the consumer behavior. Although, 25% of the producers have a variety of products, only 19.4% have online or phone orders and are promoting their activity through the virtual medium. 16.7% deliver the

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product direct to the customer's home and have a proactive promoting activity. 19.4 % of the producers take into consideration the multifunctional aspect of their activity by organizing courses, events, visits for educational purposes, complementary therapies etc.

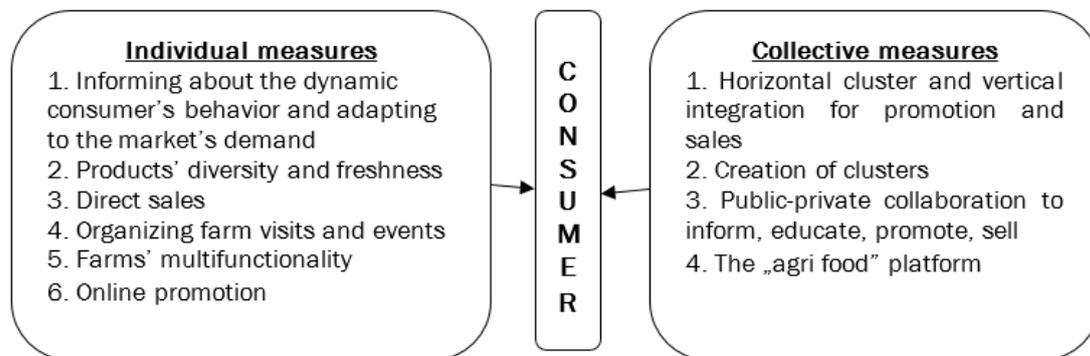
Only 25% are willing to try associations and collaborations related with promotion and sales, as well as allowing visits to the farms. When asked about price reductions and free products, 83.3% of producers often use this practice. All of them think that the bureaucratic side needs improvement and want the state institutions to have a more active role, whereas up to current times they have not contributed to the improvement of promotion and sales. Furthermore, almost 16.7% have invested or wish to invest in processing the fruits and vegetables, lowering their losses and adding value to their activity.

The representative of a certifying and inspection organization confirmed that the problems with the stuffy bureaucracy and the fact that many farmers give up on producing with an ecological system because of the lack of informing and preparation in the field, the fact that there have been discrepancies between farmers and the institutions in the field and the fact that the lack of promotion and information for the consumers lead to an unfavorable market for the ecological farmers. All 4 stakeholders' representatives consider that there is a need to better inform consumers regarding what an ecological product means, starting from nutritional facts and the health benefits as well as understanding that they contribute to protecting the environment and the society's wellbeing. Beyond that, they consider that more events and fairs in this field need to be organized to create bonds between producers and consumers and that the state institutions need to have a proactive intervention in supporting farmers, not just with subsidies but also by promoting and selling the products and educating the consumers.

5. Conclusions and proposals

Today's consumption, under the influence of globalization, imposes the continuous research for new market survival strategies (Figure 5). Continuously informing the producers about the market dynamic and the evolution of consumers' needs represents the development fundament for a successful business. Quality, diversity and freshness become the strengths in satisfying the consumers' needs on a steady rise as well as creativity in packaging, labeling and adapting the products' packages. By using communication technologies one can maintain with minimal effort a constant level of information, promote and give clients the possibility to interact and give feedback.

HANGANU, I., FLESERIU, C. (2019).

Good practices for improving promotion and sales for Romanian ecological agricultural products*Source: Made by the authors***Figure 5. Measures to improve promotion and sales for ecological agriculture products**

One can add value to the activity by stimulating clients with organized events, games, prize winning contests with the goal of retaining customers and giving multifunctional aspects to farms (organizing events, trainings, cooking and alimentation courses, educational visits, nonconventional therapies etc.) (WTO,1998).

Direct sales revenues can be increased and can build a long-term relationship, but in order to have a sustainable rural partnership on the horizontal direction and vertical integration with the same target customer segment (tourism associations, administrative-territorial organizations) would be much more effective.

By creating local partnerships between small farmers and local institutions one can guarantee buying and collecting all the available products such as those that can be sold to big retailers thus contributing to rural development, adding value at a local level, encouraging environmentally friendly production, all while maintaining reasonable prices for everyone. The fact that for the moment, as followed from a European initiative, there is the intention to implement a digital “Agri food” platform through which one can make a virtual market of agrarian products by allowing the meeting of producers and customers represents an important step toward digitalizing the promotion in this field.

The experience of countries such as the Netherlands, Latin America, India show that establishing networks that allow legal, financial, control and inspection, research, provisioning, marketing and sales consulting will encourage the production and consumption of ecological products.

The intervention of the state towards a more supportive approach for the sustainable agriculture should be done with double effect, aiming towards an active promotion that can

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be perpetuated on the long term (by supplying preschools and schools with ecological products) to support local producers and could educate the young generations, insisting on the benefits to people's and the environment's health.

Starting from the general picture on the status quo, we can conclude that the potential solutions to improve promotion and sales of ecological products are: ongoing information about the market's trends and the consumers' needs, offering the possibility to place orders online and by phone and delivering the products to the customer's homes, the diversity and the freshness of the products, establishing associations and collaborations for lowering the costs, attending fairs and niche events, adding a multifunctional potential to farms, founding agro-based clusters and promoting by educating the consumers. In countries with a rich history in agriculture, organizing an agro-cluster represents a successful solution with the condition to eliminate barriers such as: an undeveloped infrastructure, facilitated access to sponsoring sources, lack of competencies and qualifications of the human resources and last but not least, the partners need to have mutual trust (Porter, 1990, 1998, 2000).

A vital role in the development of this sector is played by the state institutions, which should adopt measures to support promotion and sales activities. The state institutions have the power to improve the population's education towards a more responsible and sustainable consumption, in harmony with nature.

Sadly, in Romania, the ecological agriculture is still at a pioneering level and because of that we have been constrained to only analyze representatives from the ecological fruits and vegetables sector. It was quite difficult to find similar research. Many of the materials found were from online sources and the international examples in this field were the starting point in identifying the ways to improve promotion and sales of ecological produce. And yet, the solutions identified are generally valid and they can constitute a useful resource to producers and entities interested in this field.

Thus, in the future we would like to continue the research, to increase the number of the respondents, to have more accurate results and to use methods that can analyze the effects generated by the implementation of the recommendations made to improve promotion and sales for ecological agriculture products

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